Interpretation to Ecclesiastes
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Israel's Wisdom Literature

Along with Proverbs, Job, and some of the Psalms, Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the OT; several extrabiblical examples of Israel’s wisdom literature have also survived. Wisdom literature deals with the right application of religious laws and basic principles to the practical issues of life: the proper distinction between truth and error, good and evil, duty and self-indulgence, sham and reality. It teaches us how to exercise prudence in secular matters and skill in business affairs, and it gives us insight into how to deal properly with people.

Its Place in the OT

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three major divisions: (1) the Torah, or Law, the five books of Moses, (2) the Nevi'im or Prophets, and (3) the Ketubim or Writings. From the statement in Luke 24:44, apparently this division reaches back to NT times. Ecclesiastes is one of the Megilloth, or Rolls, the second of three divisions of the Ketubim.

One of the Antilegomena

Ecclesiastes is also one of the books in the antilegomena (Greek, literally, [the books] spoken against). These books, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and Esther (and to some extent Ezekiel and Proverbs), are so called because questions from time to time have been raised regarding their canonicity. The problems raised in connection with Ecclesiastes involve:

- Its alleged pessimism (cf. 1:2, 18; 2:17; 7:15; 8:14)
- Its alleged denial of an afterlife (cf. 3:18-21; 9:5; 9:10)

However, even among those scholars today who vigorously defend its place in the canon of Scripture, these alleged themes have given rise to a number of diverse interpretations of the book. Although we will not review the numerous interpretations of the book, these notes will address each of these charges. To begin, however, the following section gives a summary of the approach I take to the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

According to what is perhaps the most popular approach to the book by conservative scholars, Ecclesiastes is the book of the natural man. "Ecclesiastes is the book of man 'under the sun' reasoning about life" (The New Scofield Reference Bible, p. 696). According to this view, the philosophy set forth in the book is not the result of revelation; inspiration has merely guaranteed an accurate record of the reasoning of the natural man "under the sun" (i.e., "apart from revelation").

However, the author of Ecclesiastes claims just the opposite:

In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of {these} collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. (Eccl 12:9-11).

The author himself describes his book as "words of truth...given by one Shepherd". This is a direct claim to
revelation and positive instruction from God, and it is no different from many other claims made within the Bible for its own divine authority (cf. Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; etc.; 2 Cor. 13:3; 2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:21; 3:15).

The view taken in these notes can be set forth in the following propositions:

1. The book in its entirety gives us divine instruction.

   It is not the "reasoning" of a "natural man"; it does not present "negative" teaching by giving us the thoughts of a man not led by the Spirit of God; it is not a debate between the sage and the fool; it is not the product of a schizophrenic or manic-depressive author; it is not pessimistic; and it does not give erroneous teaching on the subject of death, or any other subject.

2. The book has a single theme.

   It is not a collection of proverbs or pieces of advice.

3. The book is a carefully reasoned argument that leads to a specific conclusion in chapter 12.

   The book has a structure and an outline; it does not contain the digressionary ramblings of an undisciplined mind.

Bibliography

This approach to the book of Ecclesiastes can be found in seminal form in the following two papers:


It is this paper by J. Stafford Wright that is reproduced here. We have taken it from a collection of essays compiled by Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., one of my former professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972). Indeed, the essays in this book are classics, milestones of interpretation. They deal with important topics in all the major sections of the Old Testament: the Pentateuch, the historical books, the poetical books, and the prophetical books. The book also includes essays on the ethics and theology of the Old Testament.

Dr. Kaiser expanded the basic approach by Wright into a short but complete commentary on the whole book of Ecclesiastes:


The best detailed commentary is by H. C. Leupold. Leupold rejects the pessimistic approach and takes the entire book as positive instruction from God. However, he fails to find a single, coherent argument developed throughout the book.